Where Else But Pittsburgh!

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BY GEORGE SWETNAM

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WITNESS FOR JEHOVAH

IT IS AN AMAZING THING that no Pittsburgh history has ever even so much as contained the name of Charles Taze Russell, since his influence has easily been the widest of any man who ever lived in the city, not even excepting Andrew Carnegie.

He was a pioneer in the chain store, the motion picture industry and other important business ventures. He was one of the most prolific and widely read authors of his day, turning out many books and a column carried at one time by more than 1500 newspapers, with some 15,000,000 readers. He founded the one major religious movement to have appeared in the Pittsburgh district in the past too years, a movement which has reached world-wide scope and is still one of the fastest growing religious organizations in many countries.

Even his tomb is one of the most remarkable in all the Pittsburgh district, although few of the thousands who see it have any knowledge who is buried there, and most of them would not even recognize his name if they heard it. Perhaps some of them would more readily recognize the name Pastor Russell, by which the man with the great white beard was known during

most of his lifetime; a name as sincerely loved and as bitterly hated as almost any in American history.

Around that name for years raged some of the bitterest controversies which ever divided the Christian world, and the controversies still rage, although his name is not so much heard in the discussions.

Charles Taze Russell was born February 16, 1852, in what was then Allegheny, most likely in rooms over his father's general store on Federal Street. He was the only son of Joseph L. and Eliza Birney Russell. The parents were Reformed Presbyterians, members of that sturdy sect which refused to acknowledge any government except that of God, and who kept up their fight against both George III and later the youthful United States of America until well after 1830, refusing to pay taxes or take part in military service.

Young Russell's mother died when he was only eight years old. He was a sickly boy and grew up close to his father, almost always at his side in the store except when he was able to be in school. Much of the time he studied with his father or with tutors. He was always interested in religion, writing Bible verses on the sidewalks with chalk when still a youth, and joining the

Congregational Church because no Reformed Presbyterian organization was located within reach.

Those who used to know him as a boy said that he was very quick and alert, so much so that his father took him into partnership in the store when he was only 11, Charles himself writing up the articles of agreement. By the time he was 15 he was as large and almost as mature looking as a man, and in that same year his father started sending him to Philadelphia as a buyer for their business.

By 1869 they had branched out with an outlet on Liberty Avenue, and quickly the chain grew until they had haberdashery stores at several locations in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and other towns.

Like many another youth, Charles Taze Russell, although successful in business, was troubled in mind. He battled with himself over the doctrine of predestination, was revolted by the idea of Hell, and when only 17 had completely abandoned religion, discarding the Bible and the creeds. But he kept pondering these things in his mind, for though he was unable to accept religion, he was unwilling to let it go. It was as a successful but skeptical young businessman of 18 that he stepped one day into a dingy little

basement room near the Federal Street store "to see if the handful who had met there had anything more sensible to offer than the creeds of the great churches."

The preacher was an Adventist named Jonas Wendell. His conviction that the second coming of Christ was near at hand appealed strangely to young Russell, and set him once again searching the Bible for its teachings. From that day on until his death 46 years later, he engaged in the constant study of the Bible.

Soon he rented a hall in Pittsburgh and started a Bible School where for the next five years he lectured and studied with two other earnest Bible students, George Stetson and George Storrs, the latter an editor of a small religious paper called the Bible Examiner. By 1876 he joined with another Adventist, George Barbour, in writing a book The Three Worlds and in editing an Adventist paper The Herald of the Morning. But he was not completely satisfied with Barbour's theology, and in 1877 they parted company.

Then, convinced that he had the divine mission, Charles Taze Russell did a strange thing -- a very strange thing for a young man of 26 with no formal theological education. He invited all the ministers of Pittsburgh and Allegheny to a meeting, explained his beliefs, and

urged them to unite with him on that basis of faith. The fact that they accepted his invitation shows how high young Russell stood in the community, yet it is not surprising that after hearing what he had to say, they politely declined his invitation. It would have been most amazing if most of them had done anything else.

By this time Charles Taze Russell was described as nearly six feet in height, well built, and weighing about 185 pounds. His hair was long, almost down to his shoulders in the back, and he wore a neatly-trimmed goatee and fringe beard. His hair and beard were light brown. His head was large, with a broad face, wide mouth and full chin, and large nostrils. His gray eyes were piercing and stood out a little as he spoke. His manner was always calm, stressing argument rather than emotion, and sometimes even adding a touch of humor.

Rebuffed by the ministers of his home town, he told himself philosophically that the church was too much filled with worldly conformity to hear his ideas, and turned to the unchurched with his message. Determined to carry on with this work, he sold out his Philadelphia store, reduced his travel, and dedicated his entire private fortune, which amounted to some $350,000, to evangelism.

He founded Zion's Watchtower and Herald of Christ's Presence, a religious paper, published in the building which housed his father's first store in Pittsburgh. Despite his dedication to religious work, he continued to carry on the family haberdashery business for some time, and made successful investments in the Butler County oil field. He and his father opened a scrap metal business as late as 1882, but his interest in commerce gradually waned and he apparently closed the men's furnishing business the following year.

In 1879 Charles Taze Russell, now becoming more and more widely known as Pastor Russell, married one of his Pittsburgh followers, Maria Frances Ackley. But there were no children, and they were unable to see eye to eye over theological matters. After 17 years they separated although they did not get a divorce. Strongly opposed on many fronts by the time of the separation, Pastor Russell was the target of a great many stories accusing him of all manner of wrong doing in regard to the marriage. Although evidence is hard to find at this late day, there appears to have been little, if any basis for the charges.

Soon after 1880 he began to widen the scope of his work. He produced books one after another in close succession, all bearing on his beliefs in regard to

interpretation of the Bible and the duties of Christians and the imminent second coming of Christ. In 1890 the Pittsburgh city directory referred to him for the first time as "Rev. Charles T. Russell."

Pastor Russell preached to hundreds of thousands each year and his writings reached millions more. He never permitted a collection to be taken at his meetings and those who distributed his publications made no charge, taking whatever was offered, but money poured in and his work was continually enlarged.

Although scoffers referred to his followers as "Russellites," they adopted the name by which they are still known, "Jehovah's Witnesses." The growth of the organization was slow. At the first national convention in 1893 there were only 360 delegates and it was not until 1904 in St. Louis that such a convention brought more than a thousand. Yet he worked, traveled and preached untiringly despite severe headaches and other ailments.

By 1910 he had become so well known that a newspaper syndicate asked him to write a series of articles, which by 1913 were appearing in more than 1500 papers, read by millions. It was the following year that he completed work on a long-term project -- the

first epic motion picture. It was called "The Photo-Drama of Creation," and although it appeared 15 years before other sound pictures were produced, it offered a combination of motion and still pictures synchronized with a recorded lecture. It was in four parts, running a total of eight hours, and was viewed by some 8,000,000 people.

For years Pastor Russell traveled constantly, covering more than a million miles, delivering more than 30,000 sermons and lectures and talks, writing books totaling over 50,000 pages, which have reached a circulation of more than 20,000,000 copies. He made close friends and bitter enemies and was constantly accused by voice and through the press of all sorts of crimes and folly. When asked why he never denied any of these accusations, he once replied, "If you stop to kick at every dog that barks at you, you'll never get very far."

When anyone who recognized him from his picture would approach and ask if he were not Pastor Russell, his reply was always the same: "Have you consecrated your life to the Lord?"

Late in life he set up his entire fortune, by now amounting to well over a million dollars, into a trust fund for the "Watchtower Bible and Tract Society," the

business organ of Jehovah's Witnesses, which operated a large publishing house in Pittsburgh before moving to Brooklyn in 1909. During the almost 40 years of his ministry, he founded more than 1200 congregations, and sent out thousands of workers.

In the fall of 1916 the snowy-haired, white-bearded man of 64, with the broad face and saintly appearance, was on a western trip when stricken by the illness which finally claimed his life. In Los Angeles on October 2g, he was so weak that half way through his 45-minute talk, he had to sit down and finish the sermon from a chair. He died two days later in Texas on a train returning East. Thousands attended services in New York and in the Carnegie Free Library of Allegheny, before he was laid to rest in the United Cemeteries just north of Pittsburgh. His admirers sent so many flowers that the special train from New York could not hold them.

There's only a small stone at his grave, but beside it is a large granite pyramid containing copies of most of his writings. The monument is a strange one -- almost as strange as the career of the man for whose memory it stands.

All through his life, he had told his followers not to revere him as more than just a fellow man with divine guidance. And he had taught them this so well that his work passed into the hands of others with hardly a moment's halt and the publishing house which he founded has never published a biography of Pastor Russell.

Although his teaching has been highly controversial, it has had wide effect. The Witnesses have been persecuted and suffered mob violence at home and abroad. Their belief that to salute a flag was a form of idolatry caused a furor in both world wars. Like the founder's Reformed Presbyterian ancestors, they recognize no true government except that of God, although they obey the law as far as conscience will permit.

The teaching which was launched by the youthful haberdasher in Pittsburgh in a rented hall has grown and spread. The Watchtower, of which only 6,000 copies were published when it was first founded in 1879, now distributes 1,500,000 copies of each issue and in almost 40 languages. And at a convention in New York in 1958 some 250,000 Witnesses from about 100 countries filled both Yankee Stadium and the Polo Grounds to hear the same doctrines which young

Charles Taze Russell had preached to the unreceptive clergymen at Pittsburgh just 80 years before.

THE AUTHOR

GEORGE SWETNAM is a well-known Pittsburgh author, historian, and folklorist.

Growing up in the South, he graduated at the University of Mississippi, and has been professional photographer, college professor, salesman, freelance writer, businessman, preacher, hobo, and newspaperman. He holds a Ph.D. degree in Assyriology, and claims to have ridden more freight trains than any Ph.D. alive.

Soon after coming to the Pittsburgh district some 25 years ago, he became fascinated with the history and folklore of the area, and has made it his constant study ever since. His published books include "Pittsylvania Country," "Bicentennial History of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County," and "So Stand Throughout the Years"; and he is co-author of "The Presbyterian Valley" and "Early Western Pennsylvania Folk Hymns and Hymn Tunes." For the past 15 years he has been a staff writer and historian for the Pittsburgh Press.